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ABSTRACT

There is a pressing need to empower the individuals of dispossessed communities in South Africa to take charge of their own destinies, especially in the area of early childhood education and care (educare). Current educare projects are often completely or partially controlled by organizations or people outside of the community. A prime task of organizations in the educare field must be the transfer of information and knowledge to communities so that they can take charge of preschool educare provision. Specifically, the Grassroots Educare Trust responds to community requests for assistance in the establishment and management of community-controlled preschool educare projects. Preschool educare provides an important site for the empowerment of: (1) young children, through a progressive curriculum in which they take the initiative for their own learning; (2) educare teachers, providing them with the tools they need to build careers on the job; and (3) parent committees, providing them with information and knowledge so they can establish and administer their own projects. (MDM)

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EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PRESCHOOL EDUCARE, OF CHILDREN, OF TEACHERS AND OF PARENTS

BY

JINNY RICKARDS AND ERIC ATMORE

Keynote address delivered at a Conference of the Society for Social Workers of South Africa, entitled Empowerment of Individuals and Communities, held at the University of the Witwatersrand, 20 - 21 July 1990.

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ABSTRACT

We believe in the empowerment of people and communities. We believe that people have knowledge and experiences that form the basis of their learning. We believe that learning should be active and participatory. A prime task of organisations in the early childhood educare field must be the transfer of information and knowledge to communities so that they can take charge of preschool educare provision.

Preschool Educare provides an important site for the empowerment of:

* young children through a progressive curriculum in which they take the initiative for their own learning.

* Educare teachers, providing them with the tools they need to build careers on the job.

* Parent committees, providing them with information and knowledge so they can establish and administer their own projects.

Each and every community has the right and responsibility to take charge of the provision of early childhood education and care for their young children. This means the power to make decisions about educare provision.

We like this definition of power: 'the capacity of some persons and organisations to produce intended, foreseen and unforeseen effects on others' (van der Eyken, 1989). Being powerless then means to have others make decisions which have intended, foreseen and unforeseen effects on you! We know that when power is exerted in an oppressive manner this leads to negative self-image, loss of pride and confidence, and worst of all, to alienation.

Empowerment is a purposeful process which shifts the perceptions of powerless individuals, groups and communities, and enables them to assume greater capacity, and to gain access to and control over resources which affect their lives. People usually desire power because of an existing imbalance which disables them, alienates them and denies them their basic rights. Perceptions of self and others play a major role in feelings of powerlessness. Empowerment is a process rather than a one-off product, and it is about perceptions, understandings and skills acquisition.

Adults and children in this country have been made powerless - robbed of their self-esteem and confidence; denied skills, opportunities and choices; and access to resources - because of race and poverty. These adults include most of the parents of South Africa's 6.5 million preschool children. Clearly this has a huge impact on our children and thus empowerment of parents must be on the agenda of early childhood educare activists and advocates.

The need for empowerment in this field was well expressed by Patsy Govender (1987) when she said at the Free to Be Conference in Cape Town:

> "It is only when individuals and communities are able to gain control over their lives, when they are (able) to exercise choices and take decisions for themselves, that effective change both of their own and their children's life situation(s) becomes feasible. Thus it is only through the empowerment of the disadvantaged that disadvantage itself can be overcome".

Let us look at various forms of Educare control which exist in South Africa. Firstly, there are those Projects in which an outside organisation has full control over the day-to-day activities of the Educare Project. Parents and their wider community have little or no say in running the Project and are expected only to fundraise. Even here all income generated from fundraising may sometimes go to the outside organisation. The rationale for this approach is patronising - the community needs our help, we must teach them the correct (in other words our) way to do things.

Whilst outside intervention and control is often more efficient, effectiveness is almost always lost. Things may get done but this is usually by someone else, and results in a relationship of dependency.

In the second case, the Educare Project belongs to an outside organisation through membership or affiliation. Here the Project is granted some power, but this is very limited. For example, a parent may sit on the executive committee of the controlling organisation, parents may fundraise and spend the money raised themselves, and they may purchase equipment within a budgeted figure. They do not, however, make policy, employ staff or control income and expenditure.

In the third case, the Project is controlled by the community and more particularly by the parents. This means that they are responsible for all that happens in the Project. They make policy, employ staff, decide on curricula and programmes, must balance their books, own or rent the building themselves, and account only to the parent body and funders. Clearly this is what we advocate.

So by community control we do not mean 'in consultation with', 'in partnership with' or 'delegated power'. By community control we mean that the community has full responsibility for policy decisions, and the organisation and management of the Project. This does not reduce the need for strict accountability for these funds.

Grassroots Educare Trust is about empowerment - the empowerment of children, their mothers and fathers, their teachers, and their communities.

In a sentence, GRASSROOTS RESPONDS TO COMMUNITY REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE IN THE ESTABLISHMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED PRESCHOOL EDUCARE PROJECTS.

In that one sentence is locked a whole series of concepts.

'Grassroots <u>responds to community requests</u> ...'

Our experience, is that people know what they need, they don't need to be told what is good for them. Only when people have articulated a need, do they identify with it and work to make need into reality. Indeed we may resent and shun what we are told we ought to have, even if it does answer a need. And clearly when people own the need and move to meet it, they develop as individuals and communities. It is for this reason that Grassroots prefers to wait for requests made by community groups.

'... <u>community-controlled</u> preschool Educare Projects ...'

This means our experience is that people can, with appropriate support, provide their own preschool services. This has multiple benefits. If they were to wait around for 'them' - the authorities or some unknown 'experts' - to provide the services, they might well wait forever. And having waited, find themselves locked into a bureaucratic or paternalistic service from which they are totally distanced, which fills them with resentment and strips them of their power. By doing it themselves as empowered individuals, ordinary mothers and fathers (if there is any such thing as an ordinary mother or father) acquire teaching, leadership and management skills.

When a community group approaches Grassroots for assistance we explain to them that we will not run their Project for them, that we will not make decisions which they should be making, that we will not control them and that they cannot join us as members. From Day One, when we first interact with a community group, we respect their autonomy. This means accepting that our role as a training and resource agency is limited to training, advice-giving and support, and that full decision-making authority lies with the community group. This is difficult for some professionals to handle, given that years of training (usually tertiary) have instilled in many a belief that professionals are there 'to solve people's problems'.

The professional working in the community <u>has</u> a specific role to play in the empowerment process. That role is to pass on information and knowledge, and to thereby equip individuals with the skills required to take power. Power cannot be given. It cannot be packaged and dispensed. Rather it is there to be taken by communities. However, to empower themselves community members need skills, information and knowledge which professionals, for various reasons, have. The relationship between professional and community is therefore a complementary one. Professionals can best contribute by providing learning opportunities and situations for communities to acquire skills and assume power.

Empowerment through the acquisition of skills and knowledge increases the individual's control over her life, her self-esteem and her sense of belonging to the community.

We can cite many examples of this. Here are the stories of two women, though of course such experiences are not limited to women. A woman in New Crossroads, Cape Town who, on becoming the elected Treasurer of a community-controlled Educare Project received bookkeeping training, proved to be an excellent preschool Treasurer, and went on to become a paid administrator at a local primary school where her new skills proved invaluable. She is now tackling a computer. She is also passing on her skills to the newly-elected Treasurer of the Educare Project.

A Langa woman, working as a sleep-in domestic worker (which meant she only saw her family over weekends) was elected as Treasurer of the Executive Committee of the preschool Educare Project her child was attending. She was trained in bookkeeping skills by Grassroots, and is now employed as a confident and competent Educare teacher (again trained by Grassroots) in an associated Project. She is participating fully in her own community, and is, as well, able to live with her family.

Everybody wins this way. People can prove to themselves and their families and their communities that they can do the job. Their heightened self-esteem is challenging old patterns and opening up new horizons. They learn to challenge the assumption that fathers are chairmen and mothers are secretaries.

At the organisational level, empowerment means increasing the power of groups so that they gain access to and control over resources. Let us give just one example. A group of mothers in that same New Crossroads community needed educare for their children. The local Educare Project was overcrowded and there was no other building which could be used. With support from a friend with good contacts R 140,000 was raised for a building, they were able to help with the design, advise the contractor and see the project to completion. We advised and supported the group who accepted some of our advice, and rejected some of our advice. We joined them to celebrate the opening of their building and the achievement it signifies.

And they and their fellow Executive Committee members are learning to manage - not only financial accountability and all the other competencies so essential to administering any project - but learning to manage inter-personal relationships, democratic decision-making, and accountability to the broader parent community whose mandate they carry. These less tangible learnings that result from joint problem-solving and sensitive communication are an invaluable by-product.

We have been talking here about the totally autonomous management of Projects, acquiring skills by practising them, not 'we'll manage for you until you know how,' or 'we'll allow some parents to be on the committee with the experts'.

We experience vigorous response from communities to the challenge to spend time, money and energy on building up preschool Projects. We see communities become vibrant and cohesive through the assumption of mutual responsibilities and through the acquisition of management and teaching skills.

"... requests for assistance ..."

We have a document called 'SERVICES OFFERED' which spells out to community groups what Grassroots can offer them. Our ability to respond positively depends on our human and financial resources, and on distance.

Thus in the Western Cape we have nine pairs of Community Educare Trainers, each based in a different geographic region, from the West Coast across the Boland and Overberg to the South-west coast and each pair trains and supports 12-15 Projects.

One half of the pair gives training and on-going support to the Educare personnel employed by the Project - both Centre and Home-based. Our Educare Trainers have three tools - the full GETCET (Grassroots Educare Trust Centre Educare Training) curriculum, a Basic Educare curriculum and a Home Educare curriculum . The other half of the pair offers training and on-going support to the parent Executive Committees of a number of community-controlled Educare Projects, using as tools our Community Organisation Training and Financial Training curricula. (To make the commitment to Project autonomy realistic, this is as essential for committees as is the acquisition of teaching skills for untrained teachers.)

In addition we have resources to back up the nine pairs in the Western Cape giving direct help, and to back up communities throughout the country who request our assistance from a distance. These resources include our Preschool Shop, which can supply anything from a jungle gym to a stove to a toy designed to enhance fine motor control; and our Resource Centre which supplies ideas and information through a library of books, through toy libraries and theme suitcases for those nearby; and through dissemination of Educare advice and information both near and far, to an ever-increasing network.

Our EDUCARE HANDBOOKS 'How to start and run a community preschool project' are our most easily disseminable support to communities around the country. The titles give you an idea of the skills and knowledge involved:

How the community can run the project
Getting premises
Getting registered and subsidised
Looking after the money
Employing staff
Preschool Educare: An active learning experience.

'... establishment and management ...'

A major factor in the community Educare Project's progress is effective general organisation management, that is, seeing that :

* the constitution is followed
* meetings are held and well run
* good decisions are made and implemented
* problems are solved
* the building is well maintained
* interpersonal relationships are good
* relations with other organisations in the field are established
* there is a budget.
* the money is well looked after
* fundraising is done

These concerns are covered in our Community Organisation Training (COT) course.

Arising out of the need of communities to run their projects on a sound financial base we have also developed a Financial Training curriculum. Through this, committee Treasurers receive hands-on training in the record keeping (bookkeeping) skills required for sound financial management of Educare Projects.

'... Preschool Educare projects'

Preschool education is not about teaching young children to learn to read and write early so they can go on to be top of their class at school. In fact, there is no evidence of lasting academic gains resulting from a good quality preschool education. However, children who've had a good preschool experience grow in self-confidence and self-esteem. That is, they are empowered. They do better at school because their first experience is pleasurable, and they go on to primary school prepared to be winners and not losers.

But the real gains are gains for life. We can't say it better than we did in our introduction to Educare Handbook 1: 'There is evidence to prove that a high quality preschool educare programme is more likely to produce young adults who

- think for themselves
- understand and solve problems
- concentrate, plan and create
- get on well with others
- listen, share and take turns
- cope with feelings like excitement, fear, anger and frustration
- know, accept and like themselves
- are secure and independent
- are physically strong and well.'

These are the sort of South Africans we need to lead us into the future we all dream of.

Our Educare curriculum concentrates on the active involvement of the preschool child in a democratic learning process and in the development of problem-solving skills. The emphasis is on the development of a set of skills and attitudes rather than on the acquisition of a body of knowledge. In addition, the curriculum is carefully constructed to start from the child's experience - endorsing what is good in the child's world; and building on the child's self-esteem in a way that is culturally appropriate.

The Educare teacher's role is to respond to chilren's experiences and to help children to think about those experiences at a level consistent with their development. The essence of the method is learning from experience, which even the youngest child does.

We call this ACTIVE LEARNING. This means that the adults in a child's life, be they parents or Educare teachers, because they know that the child must construct her own knowledge, will not impose on her a whole range of pre-digested, stereotyped and often sexist 'stuff', any more than they will impose cultural stereotypes.

So much for the empowerment of **children** through this curriculum. Listen to what some teachers said about the empowering effects of their training:

> 'I regarded myself just as a housewife before. I relied on my husband to do everything. Now I can go out and do things for myself and come back and discuss them with him and feel good about it. I have much more self confidence and I trust myself more. I can actually talk to people.'
>
> 'I can see and feel a change in myself. I now plan my own life ... I feel very comfortable with my added responsibilities.'

'... Preschool Educare projects'

We have inherited from the first world a tradition where middle-class children go to nursery schools because their parents know it enriches their already rich lives. And those children can go home at lunch time to their well-regulated homes.

The tradition for the children of working mothers was the 'creche' - the safe place where a child could be kept clean and fed while her mother toiled in the factory, because no nursery school would look after her from 7 in the morning until 6 at night. A cared-for body, yes, but in many cases, a totally unstimulated mind.

This is clearly crazy. All young children need a good quality education programme and, in our industrialised society, an increasing number of families need full-day care for their young children. In a community-controlled Educare Project parents have the power to negotiate the hours the Project operates so that it truly meets the family's needs during the long hours that parents are away at work.

'...preschool Educare projects.'

Usually establishments for preschool children are called 'schools' or 'creches' or 'centres'. I trust I've made clear in the previous paragraph, why we do not use the terms 'school' and 'creche'. What about the term 'centre'?

We hope most fervently that a post-apartheid government will understand the importance of investing heavily in the first six years. We do not believe that it should invest in purpose-built Educare Centres for all South Africa's children. Rather a Centre should continue to be typically a church hall, housing anything from 40 - 120 3-6 year old children of working parents.

Its investment should not be in bricks and mortar, but rather in appropriately trained Educare teachers, that is non-formally, in-service trained Educare teachers. However, such teachers need training and on-going support from Community Educare Trainers.

These would be tertiary-trained Teachers, with additional Adult Education, Community Development and Health training. With the backlog in primary education, let alone in health, housing and every other social service, it is unrealistic to plan for a tertiary-trained Teacher for every 25 children, but we can plan for one for every 1,000 children.

Furthermore, Educare, even in good Centres, is not the most appropriate form of Educare for all our children. Babies up to the age of three whose mothers have to go out to work need Educare, but the hustle and bustle of the Centre, a joyful social experience for 3-6 year olds, is overwhelming for our youngest children. Our response to the needs of the youngest children has been the development of our Home Educare programme. A Home Educare Visitor is attached to the Centre, trained with the Educare teachers, and sets up a network of up to ten satellites - ordinary homes in the community - where Home Educare Mothers are trained and supported by her to educate and care for six babies each up to the age of three. This training provides much needed jobs and income for women.

Thus Centre and Homes make up an Educare Project and the rare professional expertise of the Community Educare Trainer impacts even more widely.

And though the comprehensive support for the children of working parents is Grassroots' priority, there are important reasons why Community Educare Projects should reach out from Centre and Homes, to provide programmes for unemployed parents and their children. Who better than the people of a community-controlled Educare project to empower unemployed mothers in their own recognised role as the primary educators of their children, in which they certainly need and deserve support.

I hope you can now see why we prefer the term 'Educare Project' which for us covers a range of Educare services answering the particular needs of a particular community.

Having pulled that original sentence to pieces and built it up again, Grassroots' commitments, we hope, are clear:

1. We are committed to helping to provide a strong developmental educational programme to empower today's children to become creative, contributing, open-minded members of tomorrow's society - that is people who can take responsibility for their own lives.

2. Our second commitment is to answer the desperate need of the working mother for full day care and security, as well as education for her preschool child.

   Working mothers are a major feature of modern economic circumstances - particularly under conditions of hardship, turbulence and change.

3. Our third commitment is to make skills available to dispossessed and oppressed communities - The skills of teaching, leading and administering within preschool Educare projects.

   Like other progressive organisations in South Africa, we walk a tightrope between operating within existing realities and anticipating models for our future society. But it is exciting for us to know that, in community-controlled preschool educare projects outside the control of the formal state education system, some of the key elements of people's education are being tested as part of a daily reality.

   It is widely recognised that early childhood educare offers one of the vital sites for significant, positive social action.

In our society there is an urgent need for men and women to engage, effectively and efficiently, in the tasks of building new institutions. The area of preschool provision presents an opportunity for local communities to be empowered to control the education of young children. It is a small pivot around which voteless South Africans can mobilise to take control of their own institutions - a vital ingredient in the solution of the South African educational, political and social crisis. We believe that the skills learned in this process will empower the community for the long haul towards a new society.

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